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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief overview of the literature on collaboration among higher education faculty and describes the process of creating a capstone experience for regular and special education student teachers and interns. During the 1997-98 academic year, three faculty members were assigned the task of creating a common capstone experience that would be innovative, collaborative, and professionally enriching for students and faculty alike. They created a capstone seminar experience that meets four full Fridays during the professional semester and requires student teachers and interns to leave their field placements and meet on campus. The core content includes professional development, job search preparation, behavior management refinement, professional communication and conflict resolution, and inclusionary practices. The core content only takes up part of the class time. The remaining time is devoted to a conference style format where content is generated through proposals submitted by on-campus faculty and K-12 cooperating teachers so students can choose topics of most benefit to them. On-campus faculty and cooperating teachers present the topics to student teachers and interns. Input from the students themselves was essential in developing the experience. Students helped evaluate the original course and proposed changes for the new one. Evaluative comments from students, cooperating teachers, and faculty indicate the process is valuable. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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Collaborative Conference Style Capstone Experience:

An Innovative Approach

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Collaborative Conference Style Capstone Experience:

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Introduction

In the fall of 1997, three faculty members from different departments were called upon to teach a course for student teachers and interns. Having been given this assignment two weeks before the first class the three didn't know how to approach the course. They relied upon the existing model as a starting point and had no idea what to expect from this experience. After one semester of fielding complaints from students and faculty involved with the course, the three decided to create an experience that would benefit the student teachers and interns as well as involve K-12 teachers who worked with them. This paper provides a brief overview of the literature on collaboration among faculty in higher education and describes the process of creating a capstone experience for regular education and special education student teachers and interns. This capstone experience is innovative, collaborative, and professionally enriching for students and teachers alike.

Relevant Literature

It is important to define collaboration since it is a broad term that holds different meanings for various people. As the guiding force, faculty collaboration is defined as "a cooperative endeavor that involves common goals, coordinated efforts, and outcomes or products for which collaborators share responsibility and credit" (Austin, & Baldwin, 1991, p. 4). The faculty members adopted this definition because their collaborative efforts in designing and teaching this capstone experience involved goals voted upon by faculties from three separate departments, coordinated by an academic policies

committee representing those departments, as well as credit generated by all three department.

While literature on faculty collaboration provides several examples of efforts between universities and elementary or secondary institutions, little can be found regarding collaboration among faculty in higher education. Existing literature involving college faculty does reveal that they discover ways to overcome barriers to their efforts, learn to communicate more effectively between departments, and realize the benefits and advantages collaboration can bring to themselves, their students and the university.

Several institutional barriers affect collaboration in higher education. One of these barriers is the way courses are designed. Course content is divided into subject areas belonging to a specific department (Blenkinsop & Bailey, 1995; Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997). In addition, faculty members teach in one department only, usually where they hold tenure. This is a barrier since faculty report feeling penalized for their efforts to collaborate in teaching and research (Sapon-Shevin, 1990).

Philosophical differences among faculty may provide another barrier to successful collaboration (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; Bondy, Ross, Sindelar, & Griffin, 1995). For example, in their pilot experience of a collaborative course, two professors from different disciplines found that they often disagreed on how to approach the course, the students, and the actual classroom instruction (Bowles, 1994). This might seem common; however, these philosophical differences can be an obstacle when faculty want to model a team effort to their students.

Further, there may exist an actual location barrier to collaboration among faculty in higher education. Sapon-Shevin (1990) explained that many colleges of education

separate special education and regular education departments on different floors and in different buildings. This is a key issue at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire where the general education and special education buildings are separated by a river. Faculty and students constantly walk from one side of the campus to the other for classes, meetings, and social activities. Moreover, the three faculty members often heard student teachers and interns admit they didn't know there were so many education students until they were brought together for the capstone experience.

In addition, the structure of the university reward system often impedes collaborative efforts among faculty (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; Fauske, 1993). Colleges of education tend to reward shared and individual research more than collaborative efforts. Furthermore, faculty involved in collaborative teaching and research may not have the support of their personnel committees when decisions for promotion and tenure are made. This is another issue at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire where numerous new faculty members have been hired and want to team-teach and research with members from different departments. Various department personnel plans are currently under revision to accommodate such efforts; however, not all faculty members agree with this vision.

Faculty involved in collaborative efforts need to communicate effectively to be successful. In their study of an integrative course for science and language arts methods Blenkinsop and Bailey (1995) found that the way in which they communicated, nurtured and maintained the collaborative relationship. Furthermore, Fauske (1993) in her study of cross-campus collaboration indicated that one condition for sustaining collaboration is to establish structures for facilitating communication. Sapon-Shevin (1990) described

that lack of communication between special education and general education faculty perpetuated feelings of distrust and fear and obscured the dialogue necessary for collaboration. This finding is similar to what the three faculty members at Eau Claire discovered when they attempted to create the capstone experience. They needed to continually discuss the approaches and necessary content to meet the needs of both the general and special education student teachers and interns.

Collaborative efforts among faculty in higher education can be successful and may reap rewards for faculty (Austin, & Baldwin, 1991; Gray, 1989; Blenkinnsop & Bailey, 1995; Quinlan, 1998; Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997; Bowles, 1994; Martin, 1995) if they are aware of the benefits. One benefit of faculty collaboration is gaining new insights into teaching and learning. Martin (1995) examined teacher collaboration involving the restructuring of curriculum and how teachers gained valuable insights into their own teaching. Teachers involved in the case study reported that they shared professional knowledge and the development of significant new understandings into their own experiences as teachers. Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, and Riley (1997) cite several studies demonstrating collaborative efforts, and fostering a sense of community and shared vision among faculty. This was true in the case of the three faculty members. In their creation of the capstone experience, they discovered that although they were from different departments, they shared a common vision of preparing exemplary teachers to meet the needs of all students.

Faculty collaboration creates valuable connections between departments and divisions. Fauske (1993) found that among a department of teacher education, a department of English, and four secondary schools, faculty realized that they shared

strong beliefs about preparation of teachers. In an example of a collaborative effort among several department of a college of business, Quinlan (1998) found that the project leaders believed that their efforts created better understandings between departments where there had been distrust. Weaver and Landers (1996) found that both regular and special education faculty realized there was common ground between the two programs that was necessary for all their students. Again, this is similar to the experience of the three faculty members as they reviewed the content of the general and special education courses for student teachers and interns. Much of the content from the special education course was a duplicate of the general education course, a frequent complaint expressed by student teachers and interns who were seeking dual certification in general and special education.

Finally, faculty collaboration can provide a vehicle for building relationships among faculty (Koop, 1994). Blenkinsop and Bailey (1995) indicated that they connected as colleagues and developed a solid relationship through their collaborative teaching. Quinlin (1998) described how discussions among faculty about students, learning, and teaching can "recreate collegiality" (p. 45). Through collaboration, faculty can share burdens and pressures and support one another when necessary (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, and Riley, 1997). Collaboration among faculty in higher education can build bridges between departments and divisions, reveal new ways of teaching and learning, and foster positive relationships for all involved.

Action of the School of Education

Prior to 1997 all candidates for teacher certification participated in a student teaching semester which contained an array of courses and experiences. Those students

seeking regular education certification enrolled in three separate courses that were loosely tied together and labeled "Professional Seminar." The difficulty for the three faculty members was that the students did not see the connection between the courses and viewed the seminar as something to be tolerated. Conversely, those students seeking special education certification enrolled in two separate courses dealing with similar content as the regular education offerings. Moreover, those students seeking dual certification in regular and special education had to attend both the regular and special education seminar experiences. Curriculum reform efforts during the 1996-1997 academic year provided an opportunity for the School of Education to take action concerning courses required of all student teachers and interns. Faculty from three departments met and directed the School of Education Policies Committee to coordinate the development of a common student teaching seminar.

The Task

During the 1997-1998 academic year, three faculty members were assigned the task of creating a common capstone experience that would be innovative, collaborative and professionally enriching for general education students, special education students and faculty alike. The cadre of faculty included the Director of Field Experiences, the Chairperson of the Curriculum and Instruction Department, and a member of the Special Education Department. In the fall of 1998, all School of Education faculty approved a proposal after the "new" capstone completed its pilot year.

Creation of the Capstone

"Capstone is now popularly applied in teacher preparation programs as an adjective describing the activities, experiences and/or courses that make up the final

touches in a pre-service teacher's university program (Weaver & Landers, 1996). Faculty consensus around a common vision about the make up of the most important element in a teacher education program is essential. It was with this vision that the three faculty members set forth to create the capstone experience.

The student teachers and interns receiving certification in regular and special education now attend a similar "capstone" seminar experience. The current seminar experience meets four full Fridays during the professional semester requiring student teachers and interns to leave their field placements and meet on campus. The three faculty representing the departments of Special Education, Curriculum and Instruction, and Foundations in Education have determined the core content for all education students receiving certification in Wisconsin. This content includes the following topics: professional development, job search preparation, behavior management refinement, professional communication and conflict resolution, and inclusionary practices. The three faculty structured the course in such a way that the core content takes up only part of the class meeting time. The remaining time is devoted to a "conference style format" where content is generated through proposals submitted by on-campus faculty and K-12 cooperating teachers, allowing students to choose what topics would benefit them in their professional development.

Creating Collaboration

The Director of Field Experiences, and coordinator of the new format seminar, in collaboration with the other two faculty members, solicited on-campus faculty and cooperating teachers to present topics of interest to student teachers and interns during the seminar time. On-campus faculty and cooperating teachers responded with

presentations including topics such as: classroom management, parent involvement, child abuse, strategies for working with gifted and talented, national teacher certification, resume writing, substitute teacher ideas, multiple intelligences, collaborative efforts between regular and special education teachers and more. Work sessions for seminar assignments were interspersed as well. The seminar faculty then set up a schedule enabling student teachers and interns to choose conference sessions they wished to attend. Furthermore, the seminar coordinator sent a program of conference sessions to the student teacher/intern and their cooperating teachers so that they could discuss together what sessions would be most beneficial to the student teachers/interns.

To promote this collaborative effort the faculty discovered how much support was necessary to achieve their goal. As mentioned earlier, a department personnel committee must be willing to reward this collaborative teaching effort. Secondly, on-campus faculty must be willing to support such an effort by giving up their time to prepare and present topics of interest during the seminar meeting times. In addition, K-12 cooperating teachers must be willing to share their expertise with the student teachers during their regular teaching day. Finally, K-12 administrators must be willing to release the cooperating teachers from their regular teaching duties to present at the seminars and recognize their efforts as professional development opportunities for them.

Student and Cooperating Teacher Comments

Since the goal of this pilot project was to better meet the needs of student teachers and interns, the input from the students themselves was most important. In anticipation of the new format, the capstone faculty had the students involved in the former format evaluate the course and the proposed changes for the new course. The majority of

student teachers/interns believed a conference style format would better meet their needs. Comments such as "more options would allow us to attend the session we consider important and beneficial" were common. In addition, students indicated that smaller group sizes would allow for more discussion and problem solving. Finally, one student commented that "empowerment feeds motivation." After reviewing the evaluation from that semester, the capstone faculty felt confident with piloting the collaborative, conference-style format.

At the close of the first pilot of the conference-style capstone, an open-ended survey was distributed to the all participants. Student teacher comments included "wonderful format", "fantastic", "great variety" and "glad to see more talk between general and special educators." The last comment came from respondents who recognized that the three faculty members were truly collaborating. Cooperating teachers responded with equally high praise. Samples of their responses included "liked being involved with professional development of student teachers," "professionally renewing to have a day at the university," and "please invite us again." Overwhelmingly, students and cooperating teachers (95% of the respondents) reported positively to being part of the collaborative conference-style capstone experience.

Outcomes and Future

Students, cooperating teachers, and faculty evaluative comments speak towards the value of the process and the efficacy of structuring decisions that led to the new capstone seminar. There continues to be on-going willingness of faculty across departments and disciplines to share a session during the conference style seminars, and an increasing number of cooperating teachers presenting sessions and attending the

seminar is also seen. The common threads determined in the capstone course analysis are being traced back into prerequisite courses, and faculty are talking across departments about how to coherently build these common threads while simultaneously weaving a rich diversity of thought and practice.

These efforts have not gone unnoticed by our students who watch faculty closely for insights into collaborative teaching. Students have noticed a change in faculty; they see us talking with each other and walking with each other engaged in reflective conversation about teaching practices. Students no longer wonder why a professor from the Special Education Department is conversing with a professor from the Foundations of Education Department. Moreover, students are not surprised to see their cooperating teachers spend a day at the university, sharing their expertise with university students. Finally, general education and special education student teachers and interns know each other and reflect together themselves.

Collaboration is emergent (Friend & Bursick, 1999). This means that as professionals engage in the dimensions of collaborative partnerships, they get better at collaboration. This was evident in the process undertaken at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. The three faculty members feel that their experience has been fruitful and has rekindled their enthusiasm about teaching and research. Participation in the process is motivating and exciting. Faculty members recognize the benefits of working together.

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